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TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: KERRY - ASAD: IMPROVING THE U.S. - SYRIA
RELATIONSHIP

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Syrian President Bashar al-Asad told Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senator John Kerry that the U.S. position on the Middle East peace process is Syria's most important concern. Kerry said there was consensus among President Obama, Secretary Clinton, APNSA Jones and himself on their hopes for the Middle East. The U.S. needs to talk respectfully and frankly with the parties in the Middle East. Kerry then advised Asad that the perception he got from other regional leaders is "Bashar al-Asad says one thing and does another . . . or he says he will do something and then doesn't do it." Asad demanded specific examples: "I need to know this," he said. Absolving himself of credibility gaps, Asad said he wanted better relations with the U.S. He cited counter-terrorism, a unified Iraq, and peace with Israel as areas where the U.S. and Syria have common interests. Senator Kerry asked Asad what he could take back to Washington as an indicator of Asad's good will. Asad deflected the question by asking what is the U.S. willing to do? Is it willing to revive the peace process, for example? And that seems to be the main stumbling block in restoring a U.S.) Syrian dialogue: the Syrians are unwilling to make concessions, convinced as they are that they were ill-used and unappreciated by the Bush Administration. Having apparently made a tactical decision against it, the SARG did not raise the Syria Accountability Act. End Summary.

12. (C) Senator John Kerry emphasized a new U.S. approach to diplomacy in the Middle East during a February 21 meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad that lasted more than two hours. Also attending the meeting were Syrian FM Walid al-Muallim, Presidential Advisor for Political and Media Affairs Bouthaina Shaaban, and Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Mustafa. Kerry was accompanied by Charge as well as SFRC staffers Frank Lowenstein and Perry Cammack. This cable reports on the discussion of the U.S.) Syria bilateral relationship. Other subjects are reported septels.

Changing Times

13. (C) Asad opened the meeting with Senator Kerry by noting that the position of the U.S. on the Middle East peace process is the most important concern for Syria. Senator Kerry, noting their previous meetings under the Bush Administration, said the approach of the Obama Administration would be different. Kerry said there was consensus among President Obama, Secretary Clinton, APNSA Jones and himself on their hopes for the Middle East. The U.S. needs to talk respectfully and frankly with the parties in the Middle East. Asad, he said, would of course have a vision of where he

hoped Syria would be in the next five to ten years; Kerry posited Turkey's foreign policy as a useful model of respectful engagement with a variety of partners in the region and in Europe and as an example of a good balance between security concerns and regional relationships. Noting there are "big changes" ahead in how the U.S. will be dealing with Syria, Iran, and the region, Kerry cited the concerns of regional players like Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Saudi King Abdullah and other powers like Russia and China over Iran's behavior. "People who think Iran is in the ascendancy," he said, are making a mistake." The U.S. will offer genuine choices that make sense to parties with whom we want to reach agreement. The U.S. will also take strong positions on issues such as nuclear weapons. "I've recommended the U.S. reduce its nuclear arsenal to 1,000 warheads," Kerry said, adding that he will also try to get Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), to push the nuclear fissile material control treaty, and to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iran will see a different climate and its window for making choices and decisions is moving.

"Asad says one thing and does another . . . "

14. (C) Kerry then advised Asad that the perception he got from other regional leaders is "Bashar al-Asad says one thing and does another . . . or he says he will do something and then doesn't do it." Recognizing that Asad would like to change some things, Kerry said the U.S. would like to be helpful. "We both need to take steps to change the atmospherics . . .

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You have the opportunity to help us take mutual steps." Kerry cited sending a Syrian ambassador to Lebanon and expressing support for the Arab Peace Initiative as examples of ways in which Syria could be helpful.

15. (C) Asad, honing in on the accusations regarding his credibility, demanded specific examples of when he had said one thing and done another. "I need to know this," he said. "It is important to have trust." Former Secretary of State Colin Powell "started this problem about what is said and done . . . Egypt and Syria have a conflict, with Egypt accusing Syria of making problems over the Palestinian issue," said Asad, assuming one source of the accusations was Egypt. And, clearly running through other examples in his mind, Asad said, "When (Former NEA Assistant Secretary/current Undersecretary for Political Affairs) Bill Burns came here with a list of demands, I was very stubborn with him) I am like George Bush in this way."

The Nature of Influence

16. (C) Evidently absolving himself of credibility gaps, Asad said he wanted better relations with the U.S. There were issues on which Syria and the U.S. had common interests; he cited counter-terrorism, a unified Iraq, and peace with Israel as examples. "I've never had a detailed dialogue (with any American) but you and some Europeans . . . the U.S. tried isolation but what did it gain? . . . And what did American support of Israel gain it (the U.S.) in the last decades?" "If you want big goals," Asad advised, "you should work with every influential player." Syria has very good relations with Turkey, he noted, and Iran supports Syria, even on its pursuit of peace with Israel. "Don't put me in (Iran's) nuclear basket," Asad said, implying that Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program had nothing to do with Syria. Hamas, he argued, is influential; 15 percent of its vote in 2006 came from its core base but the rest of the vote won by Hamas came from secular voters. "How am I influential? . . . through the number of parties I can influence," he said.

¶17. (C) Kerry responded that nobody was suggesting that Syria and Iran would not have a relationship, but there was a perception that Iran is sending funds and weapons to Hizballah. There are more weapons there now than before 2006 and there are missiles in Hizballah's stocks, as well as Syria's, that have changed the peace process with Israel. The long range goal for the U.S., he said, was not to have Hizballah sitting with 40,000 rockets and missiles. The U.S. has the will now to engage in order to resolve these issues. That is why your ambassador (Imad Mustafa) has been called into the State Department next week. "That is what has been absent before . . . Powell and (former Deputy Secretary Richard) Armitage told you things to do but you got no credit for it." The key is for us to establish a relationship up front so that we both agree that you are proceeding along the path we've agreed.

¶18. (C) Comment: Senator Kerry asked Asad what he could take back to Washington as an indicator of Asad's good will. Asad deflected the question by asking what is the U.S. willing to do? Is it willing to revive the peace process, for example? And that seems to be the main stumbling block in restoring a U.S.) Syrian dialogue: the Syrians are unwilling to make any concessions, convinced as they are that they were ill-used and unappreciated by the Bush Administration. The unanswered question is whether dangling the carrot of a Golan track will be an effective incentive for Syria to change its behavior in Lebanon, Iraq, and with the Palestinians. Our sense is that it will take a considerable investment on our part to find out.

¶19. (C) Comment continued: In the meantime, we expect the early phases of re-engagement to be frustrating, even if both sides make efforts to create a positive atmosphere. Asad's expectation that the Obama Administration will provide recompense infuses the regime's thinking about next steps and manifests itself in the erratic and erroneous media spin engineered by Imad Mustafa. Conspicuously absent from Kerry's discussion with Asad, and indeed any of the other February codels' meetings with the SARG, was the subject of U.S. sanctions. A remark attributed to Imad Mustafa) "Syria did not and will not negotiate for the Syria Accountability Act") appears to sum up the SARG's attitude and tactical approach to getting sanctions lifted. Rather than exploit the successive codel visits to build support for

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lifting sanctions, Syrian pride kept Asad from raising the subject at all. Perhaps the Syrians expect that sanctions will disappear if a peace deal with Israel is reached. The SARG clearly has a long way to go before it understands Washington dynamics but, given their misconceptions, the prospect for finding common ground to move forward on shared goals becomes all the more challenging.

¶10. (U) Codel Kerry has cleared this cable.
CONNELLY